Depot Town Rag

October 2006

Kidding around down by the railroad tracks

100% FREE *RAG* CONTENT

Volume 21, Number 6

A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

What are those darn kids up to now?

What a Depot Town kid is all about these days

They're back in school, but we still here the mantra:

"So, whadyawanna do?" "I dunno. Whada *you* wanna do?"

That monosyllabic conversation among the kids is not nearly so long and tedious for those who live within walking distance of Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town. This is the place kids converge upon right after school and this is their easiest substitute for summer camp.

While some suburban shopping malls prohibit children from visiting without an unlimited credit card, most Depot Town merchants welcome citizens of all ages.

Kids not only shop here, they work here. It's their neighborhood too and, from their demeanor on the block, they seem to appreciate the reality of growing up in a community where their parents and grandparents have warm and friendly connections.

And—in addition to the restaurants and shops—there's a whole lot more neat stuff to do. Most kids start out early by waving at trains with their grandparents; over time, they graduate to fishing in the river and playing soccer on Frog Island. They march in the holiday parades and show their stuff at the many local festivals.

This is the place where kids come to get their hair cut. This is where they see those cool old cars. This is where people will talk to you on the street as if they've known you forever.

These kids are not mall rats hanging out to see what is the newest trend in the school costume competition. This is a place where kids feel at home and are a vital part of their community. It's always been that way down by the depot in Ypsi and our youngest generation continues a long and proud tradition.

The Little Engine That Could

...must have stopped at Ypsi's depot often. At least the popular children's bedtime story stopped here, and it left an impression on every child in the neighborhood over the years.

"I think I can, I think I can" has been the motto of hundreds of tots who grew up on this block over time and this issue of *The Rag* recognizes—not their adult accomplishments—but the "I knew I could" attitudes that were instilled here during their childhoods.

Generations of current and former Depot Town Kids are seen here on any given day and their collective creative spirit continues to refresh the neighborhood.

Not another boring day down by the depot

At left, left to right:, Jessica Lopez, Josh David, Forrest Karnopp, Cody Grams, and Daniel Lopez plotting their day's adventure in Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town

Alfonso Sains, of the W.H. Canon Company, watered last summer's flowers in downtown and Depot Town, keeping two of Ypsilanti's commercial districts Chamber-of-Commerce-brochure perfect all season long.

FALLAPALOOZA

A Sidewalk Celebration

Saturday, 7 October

Sidewalk sales & exhibits
Cornstalks on the lamp posts
Music on the street
Merchants' Scarecrows on Parade
...and other fun stuff
all around the neighborhood

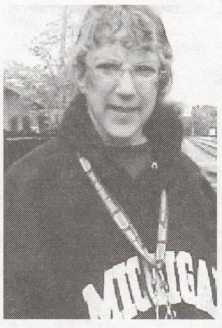
Featuring a fundraiser for the Ypsilanti High Drama Club invited to Edinburgh, Scotland's 2007 Festival Fringe
Comedy • Music • Performances

Enchanted Florist celebrating five fabulous years on the block

There's been a top quality florist on the block ever since the earliest days when the greenhouse and gardens were attached to the MCRR depot here.

Laura Lanzon's Enchanted Florist continues that fine tradition as they celebrate their fifth year at 46 East Cross at Ninde Street.

Miss Amtrak at the RR crossing



'Miss Amtrak' keeps the trains running on time from her post in Depot Town

In a town with an ordinance against *waving on the street*, Miss Amtrak provides a sensible example

Priscilla Fisher may not keep a "regular schedule" here, but the Amtrak trains do. Fisher rides the bus in from her home in Ann Arbor to check on the government-owned passenger line several times each week.

"I jump up and down and wave—and the engineer waves back to me," says this 58-year-old woman who was "crowned Miss Amtrak" in 1999.

A regular rider between Chicago, Ann Arbor, and Detroit, Fisher noticed the passenger trains that stopped at Amtrak's depot in A2 were always late. "The ticket agent told me they were always an hour behind because they had to follow the Norfolk & Southern freight trains."

Determined to do something about that, Fisher vowed to contact the railroad companies and get them operating on time. "The ticket agent told me," she remembers with a gentle smile, "that, if I could get the railroads to run on time, he would crown me 'Miss Amtrak.'"

It is difficult to make such long distance phone calls when you are homeless and living in a shelter, but Fisher persevered and she succeeded. The agent kept his promise and Fisher wears her honor proudly.

"Amtrak trains are 90% on time now," she notes, and she checks them out from right next to the silver/gray signal box at the northwest corner of Cross and River Streets where she can see both the east- and west-bound passenger cars as they rush by.

Things have improved for Fisher since she got Amtrak straightened around. She grew up in Kalamazoo, attended Oakland University, and was married for 21 years before she was divorced.

"I'm single now and I love it," she says.

When she is not monitoring the trains from Depot Town, Fisher is a volunteer at a shelter for the homeless in Ann Arbor.

Those kids down at the depot have more need of models than critics

Read old *Rag* issues at www.depottown.org

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Local kid: Jack Miller, b. 1939

Plenty of kids have grown up around the depot in Ypsilanti, but Jack Miller must be among those who have stayed the longest. His dad, Carl, joined Alex Longnecker's Hudson Sales & Service in 1933 and bought him out in 1939. When American Motors took over the parent company, Carl changed the local business name to Miller Motors.

Jack was a kid who grew up in coveralls at his father's side as they sold and serviced the unique Hudson motorcars that were manufactured in Detroit until 1957. Today, with its expansion into a museum, the Ypsilanti Heritage Automotive Collection is recognized as "the world's only existing Hudson dealership" by the national media.

During his years of local activity, Miller has seen many changes in this block. "This was always a working-class neighborhood," he notes. Suspiciously eyeing today's retro streetlights and fancy landscaping on the island in the middle of Cross Street, he remembers the days when workers bought their groceries at Sinkule's Market.

"There was Brooks' Market on West Michigan, and the A&P (Marsh Plating) and Packer's Market (Honda car lot) on East Michigan. And down in Dutch Town (Bomber Restaurant area) there was C.F. Smith's grocery and Bachelor's Market. But the working class folks came down to the depot to shop at Sinkule's and at Fulford's Produce," wholesale groceries (Café Luwak)

Fulford's, he remembers, brought in truckloads of fresh produce from Detroit's Eastern Market early every morning. "All the old schoolteachers who lived up at the Counselor Apartments used to come down here for their groceries. They also shopped at Leighton's (later Chapman's) Poultry House where John Pappas's sculpture studio is."

Workers bought their work clothes at Harry Share's place (Enchanted Florist) while the professionals shopped downtown at Mellencamp's and Hayward's.

This depot kid remembers "wives lining up their cars at the depot at 5:45 every evening, waiting for their husbands to come in from Detroit on the commuter train."

Depot Town had a regular clientele who shopped the stores every day all year 'round, the district's oldest kid recalls.

Other depot businesses Miller remembers from his childhood include Weber Drug (Aubree's west bay), Turner's Restaurant (Cady's east bay), City Body, Anderson & Deck (Salt City Antiques), Ring's beer and pop store (Olde Towne Silver & Gold), and Economy Cleaners (BirdBrain).

"Where that walk-through (Market Plaza) is now, a building burned down, but the fire department saved the rest of the block," Miller remembers.

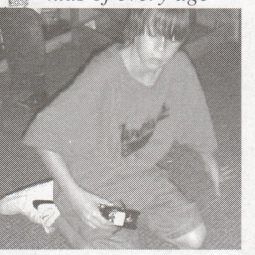
Kids' Stuff

A "gang" of neighborhood boys looks for gifts for their moms at The Cheeky Monkey

Clerk Vyrna Horn cashes out young customers at Gordon's Five & Dime

Depot Kids shop for candy at Gordon's—the same stuff their grandparents used to find, but now it's wrapped

Jack Minzey gets his back-to-school haircut from Cinderella at Paula's Barber Shop, a popular spot for kids of every age



In Depot Town, you can find toys that operate with no batteries—and clocks you don't even have to plug in!

More Depot Kids who turned out O.K.

Linda French grew up in Northville, but hitched rides to Ypsi to borrow her dad's car. Dad Aubrey owned the Alibi Bar and Linda was not allowed inside, so she sat out in front and blew the horn until he would bring the car keys out to her.

Later, when she established the Sidetrack Bar & Grill across the street, her own daughter, **Jessica** was allowed inside. Now that she's finished a degree at Kalamazoo College, Jessica is considering going into the same business.

Jeffrey French, 27, manager of Cady's restaurant, is another French family member who remembers grandpa's Alibi Bar. Now he serves meals more elegant than anyone could have imagined in this old railroad district.

Gregory Dodd, 43, spent his high school and college years living with his parents in a third floor apartment in Depot Town, cooked at the Old Town Restaurant, and bought his first car from Jack Miller. Today he has a law firm at the top of the hill in Old Town Hall.

Ted Mull grew up on Perrin Street, went to kindergarten at Ypsi High, then to St. John's Elementary until transferring back to YHS in 8th grade. In 1960 he started Ted's Auto Electric and, now in semi-retirement, he runs the business four days a week and he and wife Judy take one week off each month for mini vacations.

Bonnie Gordon may be only six years old, but she's a regular at her eponymous Five & Dime where she helps mom and dad, Katherine and Shannon, welcome the neighborhood kids after school.

Forrest Karnopp, 11, is another contemporary Depot Kid who helps at the store. Working the cash register at his dad's Café Luwak proved to be a great way to learn to make change.

Craig Shankwiler, 49, did the heavy labor on his folks' Artrain building, signaling the district turn-around in the '70s. He then extrapolated his talent into Shankwiler Construction, counting the downtown Kresge renovation among his recent projects.

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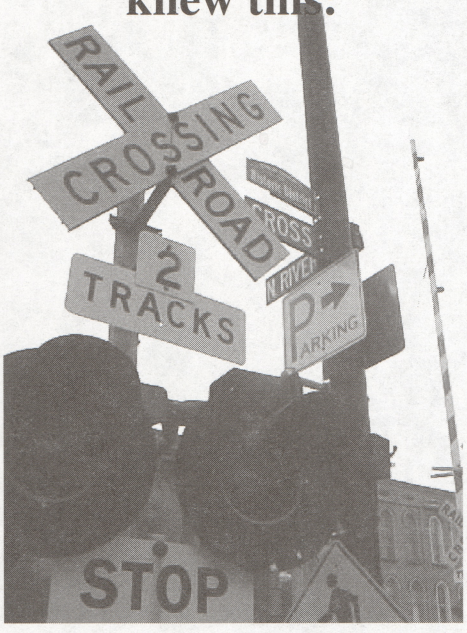
It's all *kids' stuff* down here

Depot Kids already knew this:



Never cross the tracks except at the crossing. A new fence went up last summer to help control those who were not fortunate enough to grow up alongside the railroad.

Conversation stoppers

Ten things *NOT* to say to a Depot Town kid

- How's school? What grade are you in now; grad school?
- Stand up next to your sister; let's see how much you've grown.
- Why, last time I saw you, you were only *this big*!
- What do you want to be if you grow up?
- What's your teacher's name? Does he/she know where you live?
- I drove by your school the other day. I didn't know you smoked.
- Eleven? Why, when I was your age I was twenty-six.
- So, what's your GPA? Have you declared your major yet?
- Why do you dress like that? Don't you want to be popular? Where's that nice sweater I gave you last Christmas?
- Do you have a job yet? *(When we say, "We want you to amount to something," the emphasis is usually on the amount.)*

We worry about what a child will be tomorrow, yet we forget s/he is someone today....

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In the November *Rag*:

Examining vital signs of our times, this district's notable living museum of 19th century graphic advertising art will be analyzed and annotated.

Depot Town Rag

www.depottown.com

"All the news that fits, we print"
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DTA meets at 6:30 p.m. on the third Wednesday of each month at Harrington's Standard Printing, 120 East Cross Street.

September's raffle winner

is Brooke Crawford of Ann Arbor, who placed her coupon for the September drawing in the receptacle at Apple Annie's Vintage Clothing/James MacDonald's Antiques. Crawford was in Chicago when DTA folks called to tell her about winning 25 Depot Town Dollars, but thrilled nonetheless. Not many Chicagoans can remember pre-1852 when Depot Town was larger than the Windy City.

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Kids found the traditional Buster/Tige logo inside every shoe

"I'm Buster Brown; I live in a shoe. That's my dog Tige; Look for him in there too!"

Buster and Tige appeared here

In 1878, George Warren Brown invested his life savings and founded his own little company to manufacture and sell shoes.

That little company is now a major corporation with annual sales of $2.3 billion. Today Brown Shoe is the No. 1 retailer of value-priced, brand-name shoes for the American family. Plus, they still own and market such well-known brands as Buster Brown shoes for kids, and Naturalizer, LifeStride and Connie shoes for women. Several stores in Ypsilanti carried their stock.

Many people mistakenly think the Brown Shoe was named after the much-loved Buster Brown character. In fact, the Buster Brown shoe brand came 25 years later.

In 1904 at the "Meet Me In St. Louis" World's Fair, a young Brown Shoe executive met Buster Brown's creator, cartoonist Richard F. Outcault, and purchased the name from him. At the time, Buster Brown was a mischievous cartoon character, who, together with his dog Tige and sister Mary Jane, delighted children of all ages.

Brown Shoe made marketing history when it sent on the road a series of midgets, each dressed as Buster and accompanied by a dog. They toured the country selling Buster Brown shoes as they performed in theaters, department stores and shoe stores. In those days, such a touring show generally brought out the whole town.

Dog and midget actors promoted Tige and Buster for the shoe company

Does your grandpa have "Ugly Toe Syndrome"? If so, this could be why:

Meet the Adrian Fluoroscope Foot X-Ray Machine

If you should find one of these Shoe-fitting X-Ray machines, you might want to:

- Call the Department of Homeland Security
- Keep all the evidence and sue your parents
- Stick your little brother into the bottom slot
- Just unplug it and seal off the storage room forever

There could be one lurking in a Depot Town shoe store basement right now!

Attention, neighborhood merchants:

Please check for evidence of an Adrian X-Ray Machine stored in your basement. Not only are they considered highly dangerous, but they may be in demand again at regional airports to detect shoe bombs.

The shoe fitting fluoroscope was a common fixture in Depot Town shoe stores during the 1930s, -40s and -50s. A typical unit, like the Adrian machine shown here, consisted of a vertical wooden cabinet with an opening near the bottom into which the feet were placed. When you looked through one of the three viewing ports on the top of the cabinet (e.g., one for the child being fitted, one for the child's parent, and the third for the shoe salesman or saleswoman), you would see a fluorescent image of the bones of your feet and the outline of the shoes you were contemplating buying.

The X-Ray machines generally employed a 50 kv x-ray tube operating at 3 to 8 milliamps. When you put your feet in a shoe fitting fluoroscope, you were effectively standing on top of the x-ray tube.

Not only did mothers submit their children to such high-tech torture devices with great regularity, but some tots endeavored to convince younger siblings to stick their legs, arms, or heads into the shoe slot at the bottom.

Today's children are encouraged to carefully examine the toes of their parents and grandparents to see the damage caused by such X-Ray machines found in virtually every shoe store of their youth. *[No children, dogs, midgets, or shoe corporations were harmed in the creation of this investigative report]*

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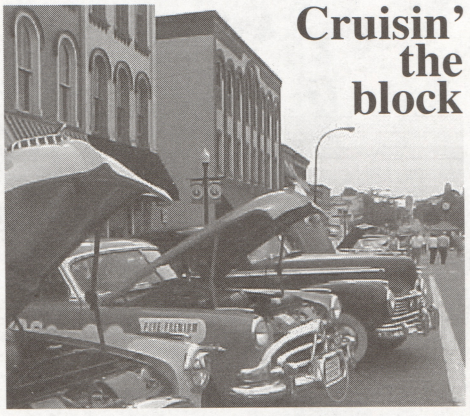


Cruisin' the block

"Cruisin'" brings out the kid in all of us—and this summer's every-Thursday night Depot Town Cruise Nights made a memorable experience for all ages.

Special thanks go to all the folks who brought their "wheels" down to East Cross Street through September 14.

Mickey Ichesco, general chair for the summer-long events sends out thanks and recognition to his "core group of die-hard car lovers who make the thing happen: Dave and Joyce Novak, Sid Stone, Mickey and Josh Stamper, Ron Pinsoneault, Linda French and John McMillan, Sharon and Richard Robine, Bob Field, Cecil Rollins, and Ted Mull."

"Our largest group was the night we had 325 cars on exhibit," say Ichesco. "It's an admission-free event with no vendors and no special sales," he says. "We do it just because we love Depot Town and it's good for the neighborhood."

Organizers have never been able to get an accurate count of the family-friendly moving crowd, but Ichesco estimates the average night's attendance to be around 1500 spectators.

RAGTIME

Coming events

Lots of kids' stuff

FALLAPALOOZA

Saturday, 7 October
Sidewalk sales & exhibits
Scarecrows on Parade
Music on the street
YHS Drama Club fundraiser
Music • Comedy • Drama
- also -
Riverside Neighborhood Assoc's
Junk-In-Your-Trunk Sale
Sidetrack parking lot on River Street

Latino Festival & Soccer Competition

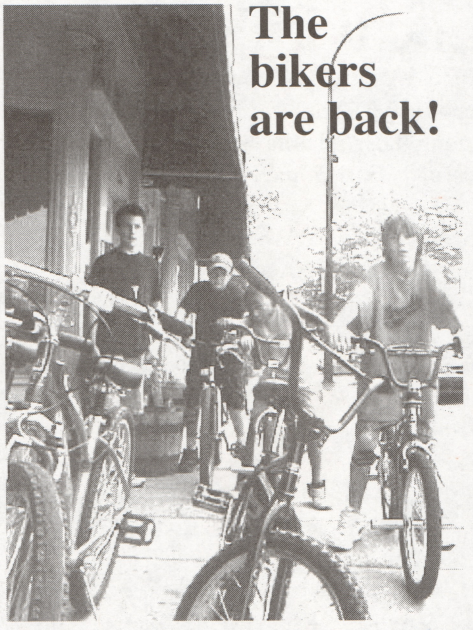
Sunday, 8 October
Frog Island Park

Depot Town Farmers' Market

Wed. 8 a.m. -4 p.m.,
Sat.7 a.m. -3 p.m.
through October

Southeastern Michigan New Year Jubilee

31 December
A family celebration at more than a dozen sites in Depot Town and downtown Ypsilanti



The bikers are back!

Depot Town's "biker image" has changed a bit over the years since the God's Children Motorcycle Club was bombed out of their clubhouse by local residents. The dynamite damage has been covered by built-in bookcases in an elegant second/third floor residence.

Gentrification alert:

In a September issue of *Metrotimes [Detroit's weekly alternative]*, a review of an art show includes a description of the small downtown surrounding the gallery. Foks who inhabit Depot Town may recognize this recently upgraded community.

The town's name and historical founding date are not printed here, but trendy and observant patrons may recognize it:

"(Name omitted) has over the past few years revamped itself as a modern-day Pleasantville. In the historic downtown district, there are brand-new awnings and sewers with grates so clean you could grill meat on them. New Guinea impatiens blanket the lawns and spill from planters in psychedelic pink. A scent from something like a spiced-pear Yankee candle wafts from a new brick building furnished with only a Dumpster. This here is a city without grit. Even the garbage smells like dessert."

That's not us—yet. Be on the alert for any future signs of gentrification.

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